

Electric Love In The Jungle Hut

An excerpt from *The Gringo: A Memoir*

by J. Grigsby Crawford

And so you're here all alone doing close to nothing and the time passes. The days feel like they'll never end, but the weeks become a blur.

And here you are, measuring your life not in coffee spoons, but in baskets of laundry done by hand, walks down the dusty road to swim in the river, and cold showers that are good cold showers because it's hot as hell and from the bathroom you can look through the crack between the brick and the corrugated tin and see the green foothills surrounding the small valley.

You measure it in Saturdays spent drinking bad beer—except it's good beer because it's light and cold and you can drink it in the shade and watch the grainy TV in the corner while the women behind the counter ask you questions about the world.

You measure it in festivals, where you go drink and dance and then spend the next six months hearing your neighbors give recaps of every girl you danced with and are sure to impregnate and marry and stay with here forever.

There are good mornings, when the sun is shining in through the slats on the ceiling and you can feel the warmth heating up the bedroom and you can feel the soft wind pushing back through the torn curtains on the far side of the room. Then there are bad mornings when the rainwater is already flooding in through the bedroom door.

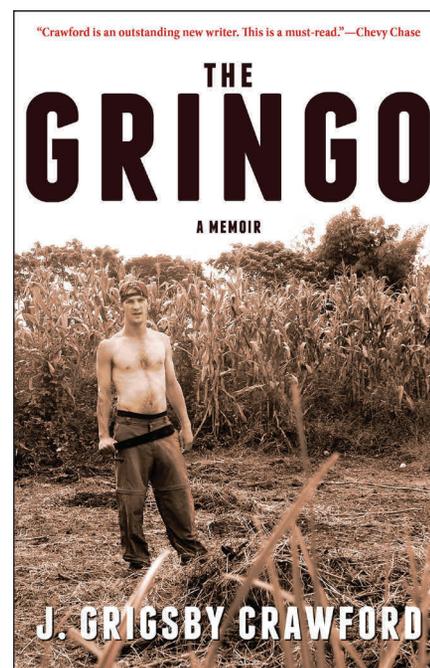
There is a calendar on the wall and turning the page over to a new month is nothing if not a satisfying and glorious feeling. But then you feel bad about counting down the months or weeks or days because you realize that this is real life, and counting the days is like marching toward death.

There are hikes into the jungle with clear creeks and tall trees and giant green leaves and gullies and caves with bats and rock walls and birds and monkeys in the distance. And there are waterfalls where you can take your clothes off and jump into water so cold that it takes your breath away.

There are letters home. In the beginning there were more and now you hardly have the energy to go through the motions of *explaining* everything. But you write some anyway.

On the hundreds of bus rides, you pass through towns that feel like the final frontier. And when it gets completely dark, you can press your cheek up against the cool glass of the window and see nothing but the stars overhead and the oil platforms blinking out across the Amazon. On these rides your mind spins through time, like a hand reaching into a shoebox to pull out the faded Polaroid memories. You listen to music on your iPod and then sometimes just look on in silence thinking about how naïve it was to imagine you could come down here and wake up one day knowing exactly what you wanted to do with the rest of your life. With the window cracked and nothing but bumpy open road ahead, you wish bus rides like this would never end.

And these are the moments of transcendence. These are the moments when you feel the levity in your chest—when you see all the people passing by and you can't help thinking that they are human and surely trying to just live their lives with some sort of dignity and that that's the only thing that really matters. Sure, soon enough you will go back to cursing them for being too slow or ignorant or rude or overly curious about you. But then you will have



another transcendent moment in the back of a pickup truck or in the window seat of another bus ride or on another walk along the river, and you'll feel tremendous guilt about the bitterness and the anger and frustration.

Here you are at a going-away party for the beautiful doctor who originally dealt with the crippling pain in your man plumbing—which had you in severe pain for over six months—and gave you the injection at the community health center. Some of the men there are talking about how pretty she is and one of them turns to you and says, among a series of winks and nods, “Yeah, Grigsby, you should tell *la doctora* that you have the same problem”—he points to your balls—“and that you need her to ‘check you out’ again.” Everyone at the party, including you, erupts into laughter, because in this life, you can choose to either laugh or cry.

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There are more floods and suicides and landslides and car wrecks. Life pushes on—even in Zumbi.

Here you are taking morning jogs through the jungle hills, dodging cattle and stray dogs, and you wonder if you dropped dead out there, how long it would be before anyone realized it.

Here you are walking between your apartment and the high school every day to check on the greenhouse you helped build. And on the walk, you always pass by a different, older greenhouse that was built with the help of another volunteer a decade earlier. The years have not been kind to this greenhouse: With its metal frame exposed and its sad tattered plastic flapping about in the breeze, it looks like the rotting carcass of one of those elephants that goes off to die alone on the Serengeti. As you continually pass by it, all you can think is how you're staring into a former volunteer's project and also into the future of yours.

You briefly date a woman who grew up an hour from Zumbi but studies modern art at a university in Loja. The two of you spend some days hanging out and eating lunch and swimming in the river together. But after a while, you lose touch. And one day, months later, you're on the bus to Loja and she gets on and sits down next to you. You spend the next two hours talking. And at one point she's telling you about her studies

and her life and her goals and she's smiling and she's beautiful and she says something that hits you and doesn't go away: "I don't want to live like my parents live." So then you see her a few weeks later and you spend the day making out and walking through a park in Loja.

You experience your second and final New Year's Eve in Ecuador. You go with a group of friends for a trip to the beach. You get drunk and eat good food and laugh and play cards and lie in the sand and get sunburned. And upon returning to Zumbi, you find that a neighbor has reported you to the police because he is worried that you're going to poison his dog to death. (It's because late one night, when his dog was barking so violently that you thought something dreadful was taking place, you went over to ask him if he could please quiet the dog.) The complaint is filed at the police station and you have to go in and explain that in addition to not being a dog murderer, you're actually an animal lover (which is a phrase that may or may not translate well into Spanish).

J. Grigsby Crawford (Ecuador 2009-11) grew up in the American West. His writing has been published in numerous newspaper, magazines and blogs, covering everything from politics to sports. He lives in Washington, D.C. The Gringo (Wild Elephant Press 2013) is his first novel.



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